THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

of

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

presents

EXPLORATIONS

Sunday, January 13, 1974 at 8:00 p.m.

Convocation Hall, Arts Building

DOVER BEACH ..... Samuel Barber (1910-)

Merla Aikman, mezzo-soprano
Yoko Oike-Wong and Elaine Ikemoto, violins
Yasuko Eastman, viola
Cheryll Melott, cello

ON WENLOCK EDGE ..... Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)

On Wenlock Edge
From Far, From Eve and Morning
Is My Team Ploughing
Oh, When I Was In Love With You
Bredon Hill
Clun

Nigel Lemon, tenor
Julie Lemon, piano
Yoko Oike-Wong and Elaine Ikemoto, violins
Yasuko Eastman, viola
Cheryll Melott, cello

INTERMISSION

PIANO QUARTET IN C MINOR, OP. 60 ..... Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

Allegro non troppo
Scherzo—allegro
Andante
Finale—allegro comodo

Robert Stangeland, piano
Lawrence Fisher, violin
Michael Bowie, viola
Claude Kenneson, cello

COMING EVENTS:

Friday, January 18, 1974 at 8:00 p.m. in Convocation Hall - The St. Cecilia Orchestra conducted by Michael Bowie, with guest conductor Claude Kenneson, will play Beethoven's Overture 'Consecration of the House', Dvorak's Symphony No. 4 in G Major and will also be joined by The Concert Choir for Mozart's Mass in C Major (Coronation Mass). No admission charge.

PROGRAM NOTES

From the beginning of his career, Samuel Barber has been regarded as a composer with a special affinity for vocal writing. As a trained singer, he possesses a first-hand knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of the voice as an instrument. As a highly literate man, he is deeply sensitive to the sound and content of language, especially English.

Dover Beach was composed in 1931, when Barber was still a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. The poetry of Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), tending to refinement and melancholy, frequently making allusion to Hellenistic themes, could be expected to appeal to Barber. Although Barber's later style was to broaden and grow somewhat more complex, he never renounced his orientation toward the romantic tradition in music. The poem "Dover Beach" is itself romantic—an evocation of a scene in nature inspiring mood and metaphor. Barber admirably captures its elegiac tone. Just as the poet "find(s) in the sound a thought," so the composer seems to find in the thought a sound. While the form of both the poem and the song is rounded and unified in various ways, the total effect is one of spontaneous continuity. One might draw analogies between the gentle ebb and flow of the sea and that of Arnold's poetry and Barber's melodic lines. The overall tone is introspective but highly expressive, the setting of the text basically declamatory yet lyrical. Barber's genius for text-setting respects both surface sound and comprehensibility at the same time that it is sensible to emotive meanings. By the simplest of means, many of them indeed cliches, Barber draws us into the poet's world.

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On Wenlock Edge was first performed late in 1909, about a year after Vaughan Williams' return from several months of study with Maurice Ravel in France. English critics of that day were thus quick to point out its superficially "French" or "impressionistic" attributes. There is no denying the special "atmospheric effects" (a phrase used by Vaughan Williams himself to describe the cycle) of certain obvious stylistic devices common also to the music of Ravel or Debussy: frequent use of parallel chords; modal harmonic progressions and melodic lines; flexible text declamation; and unorthodox sonorities (here resulting from the combination of tenor voice, piano, and string quartet). On the other hand, present-day English critics tend to stress the importance of the work as evidence of Vaughan Williams' emerging original style.

The first decades of this century saw an awakening of English national musical consciousness, in reaction to the relative stagnation of the previous century. This is also the time when Vaughan Williams' own musical orientation was turning increasingly away from late nineteenth-century chromaticism toward native English idioms, particularly folk music and literature. Indeed, his choice of France over Germany for musical study could be seen as a gesture for rather than against English musical independence, since German influences had been so dominant in England.

For this song cycle, Vaughan Williams selected six poems from A. E. Housman's large collection entitled **A Shropshire Lad** (1896). Housman disliked having his poetry set to music for the very reason composers liked to set it: it had such such strong musical qualities of its own. That Vaughan Williams chose to cut or slightly alter certain poems disturbed Housman still more. The composer had as little patience with the poet's view that the original sense and cadence of the words must be kept inviolate as he did with the critics who made such a fuss over his supposed genius in the literary aspects of musical composition, in this work as well as others: "The best composer is surely he who has the most beautiful melodies, the finest harmony, the most vital rhythm and the surest sense of form. There is no other criterion." Vaughan Williams' sweet sounds may at times temper the fatalism of Housman's poetry, or his lyrical melodies stretch out its length. But the natural simplicity of the music, like that of Housman's language, occasionally approaches the qualities of folk art itself, so that the art becomes inseparable from the nature it reflects.

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Brahms composed the first and third movements of his Quartet for Piano and Strings, Op. 60, in 1855. At that time he was suffering extreme emotional conflicts due to his doubts about the present and future course of his intense friendship with Clara Schumann, as well as to the deep sorrow felt by both of them at the grave illness of Clara's husband Robert, who died the next year. Concerning the first movement of the quartet, the impetuous young Brahms wrote to a friend a statement that perhaps belies the common conception of him as a composer above rhetorical programmes in his music: "Now imagine a man who is just going to shoot himself, because nothing else remains for him to do." But Brahms, perhaps distrusting the quality of work done under such stress, put away the quartet until 1873-74, when he composed a new finale, added a scherzo, and revised the original first and third movements.

Opus 60 is one of five works by Brahms for piano and string instruments. The addition of a piano to the perfectly blendable ensemble of the violin family represents at once a potential bull in the china shop and a great extension of sonorous resources. Brahms was both a virtuoso pianist himself and fond of rich sonorities particularly weighted toward the lower registers. Therefore, he allows the piano to exercise its full power, even though he does not engage in virtuoso display for its own sake. He achieves an almost orchestral fullness of sound, combined with the dramatic possibilities of the concerted medium of piano versus string ensemble.

The dark, brooding qualities that have often been associated with the key of C minor are immediately apparent in the first movement. The foreboding nature of the two-note motive at the heart of the opening theme is balanced by the expansive line of the movement's second main theme. Likewise, the feverish energy of the next (scherzo) movement is relieved by a more commodious middle interlude in C major. The principle of key contrast as a function of expressive content is most striking in the slow movement, where Brahms moves into a "brighter" E major. Nevertheless, the affect is one of solace rather than peace, as witness the poignant "blue note" (the flatted sixth so dear to the Romantic generation) in the lyrical opening theme. In the fast Finale, the contrasts of key basic to the sonata form of the movement are emphasized by especially strong rhythmic differentiation between sections. Both the juxtaposition of rhythm between sections and the vertical superimposition of cross-rhythmic patterns are basic to the dynamism of a great deal of Brahms' later music.